



Chapter 4

Capacity for the Other

Luke 1:39-56

UNDERSTANDING

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DISCUSSION

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read Luke 1:39-56

The Big Picture

A woman is particularly endowed to embrace and cherish others.

“The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that *God entrusts the human being to her in a special way*. Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns women in a special way—precisely by reason of their femininity—and this in a particular way determines their vocation.”¹⁷

—Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*

In the last chapter, we looked at the way Jesus treated a woman in the Gospel. Unlike many of His contemporaries, Jesus recognized the unique dignity and purpose God gave to each woman and sought to help these women discover that dignity for themselves. In the next four chapters, we will move from focusing on a particular Scripture

¹⁷Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD) (Rome: Vatican, 1988), 30 (emphasis in the original).

passage to reading more from John Paul II's 1988 apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women." These passages will help us to understand some of the aspects of what John Paul II so beautifully called the "feminine genius" and the great mission that God entrusts to women because of this "genius."

Our Genius

What does John Paul II mean by "feminine genius"? In an Angelus address, he explains it in this way:

In fact, woman has a genius all her own, which is vitally essential to both society and the Church. It is certainly not a question of comparing woman to man, since it is obvious that they have fundamental dimensions and values in common. However, in man and in woman these acquire different strengths, interests and emphases and it is this very diversity which becomes a source of enrichment.¹⁸

His words echo God's original plan for the human couple, which we discussed in chapter one: that men and women were not created to be in competition but instead to complement each other. Men and women express dimensions of the human person in different ways, and together these expressions reveal the fullness of the human person.

So what are some of the feminine "strengths, interests and emphases" to which John Paul II alludes? We will start by looking at a woman's unique relationship with other human beings.

The most obviously unique thing about a woman's body is its ability to conceive and bear life. Having this physical capacity points to a

¹⁸Pope John Paul II, "The Feminine Genius," art. 2, in *The Genius of Women*, 27–28. Internal citations omitted.

greater reality about femininity: According to John Paul II, the female personality is being particularly receptive and sensitive to others, as well as generous in making a gift of self. He says,

The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way. Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns women in a special way—precisely by reason of their femininity—and this in a particular way determines their vocation.¹⁹

Application to Jesus

In the Gospels, Jesus' words and actions echo the truth about the differences between men and women. John Paul II says, "Christ emphasized the originality which distinguishes women from men, all the richness lavished upon women in the mystery of creation."²⁰

God has endowed each woman, whether she physically gives birth or not, with a natural sensitivity to the human person in all his or her unique dimensions. St. Edith Stein—an atheist Jewish philosopher and university professor turned convert, nun, and theologian who was killed at Auschwitz—expands our understanding of this idea: "Woman naturally seeks to embrace that which is *living, personal, and whole*."²¹ Stein goes on to describe this inclination as a yearning to "cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth."²²

¹⁹MD, 30.

²⁰MD, 25.

²¹Edith Stein, *The Collected Words of Edith Stein, Volume Two: Essays on Woman* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1987), 43 (emphasis in the original).

²²*Ibid.*

Some women are called to do this as literal mothers, but all are called to do this as *spiritual mothers*—reaching out to those around them—and, in their own way, to exercise and develop their capacity for the other. Stein reminds us that each woman will do this in her own beautifully unique manner when she says, “No woman is only woman; like man each has her individual specialty and talent.”²³

The Visitation (Luke 1:39–56)

Men and women are called to serve one another out of reverence for Christ. Often the service of women is practical and concrete, in direct relation to the needs of the people around her.

Because of our fallen nature, our world often sees service as degrading. However, in a Christian worldview, service has the greatest dignity. Jesus himself tells us that He came “not to be served but to serve” (Mt 20:28). John Paul II even says that Mary’s role as Queen of the Universe is based on service, in imitation of her son: “For her, ‘to reign’ is to serve! Her service is ‘to reign!’”²⁴

Pope Francis has observed that women’s role in the Church and the world is one of service, not servitude. He explains,

In the Church as well, it is important to ask oneself: what sort of presence does woman have? I suffer—to tell you the truth—when I see in the Church or in church organizations that the role of service, which we all have and should have...when a woman’s role of service slides into *servidumbre* [servitude]... When I see women carrying out acts of servitude, it is because the role a woman should play is not properly understood.²⁵

²³*Ibid.*, 47.

²⁴Pope John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women* (Rome: Vatican, 1995), 10.

²⁵Pope Francis, “Address to Participants in a Seminar Organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem*,” Rome, 12

How do we see Mary's feminine capacity for others in the story of the Visitation? We read that, after Mary's encounter with the angel, she "arose and went with haste into the hill country" (Lk 1:39) to be with her cousin Elizabeth, who was expecting a child. How many of us, after receiving the kind of news that Mary did, would so immediately turn our thoughts to another in need? Might not our own incredible news eclipse that of others? Mary selflessly takes on another person's concern as her own and bravely sets out on what must have been a tiring journey in order to serve another. We can even imagine how much more tenderly Mary may have cared for and helped her pregnant cousin, knowing what was happening within her own body.

Application to Our Lives

We, too, are called to bring Christ to others, even when the "journey" is difficult.

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DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Luke 1:39-56

STEP 1: OPENER

Do you think there are fundamental differences between men and women? Why or why not?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

In the last chapter, we examined how Jesus treated a woman He met with loving respect and dignity, an attitude often unusual for His time. Through these encounters, Jesus confirmed what we learned from reading the creation accounts in Genesis: that man and woman were each created in the image and likeness of God, and therefore with equal dignity.

In the next four chapters, we will move from primarily focusing on a passage from Scripture to focusing on passages from Pope John Paul II's 1998 apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women." In this document, the pope explores the Church's thoughts and teachings on feminine humanity. The quotes selected from the letter will help us to understand some of the aspects of what John Paul II so beautifully called the "feminine genius" and the great mission that God entrusts to women because of this "genius."

STEP 3: PASSAGE

“The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that *God entrusts the human being to her in a special way*. Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns women in a special way—precisely by reason of their femininity—and this in a particular way determines their vocation.”²⁶

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

Exploration: Questions and Answers

1. What do you think John Paul II means by the “feminine genius”?

Allow the group to discuss.

2. Read aloud: “In fact, woman has a genius all her own, which is vitally essential to both society and the Church. It is certainly not a question of comparing woman to man, since it is obvious that they have fundamental dimensions and values in common. However, in man and in woman these acquire different strengths, interests and emphases and it is this very diversity which becomes a source of enrichment.”²⁷ Do you agree that men and women express dimensions of the human person in different ways? If so, what do you think some of their complementary “strengths, interests and emphases” might be?

Allow the group to discuss.

²⁶MD, 30.

²⁷Pope John Paul II, “The Feminine Genius,” art. 2, in *The Genius of Women*, 27–28. Internal citations omitted.

3. What is unique about a woman's body, compared to a man's?

Its ability to conceive and bear life.

4. How does a woman's physical capacity to conceive, give birth to, and nourish a child speaks to a greater reality about the whole feminine personality?

Allow the group to discuss. John Paul II describes the female personality as being particularly receptive and sensitive to others, as well as generous in making a gift of self to them.

5. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II writes, "The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way. Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns women in a special way—precisely by reason of their femininity—and this in a particular way determines their vocation."²⁸ What do you think is the connection between a woman's moral and spiritual strength and this awareness of being a custodian of human life?

Morally speaking, it seems that women are more able to avoid the temptation to seek one's own advancement or selfish interests at the expense of others, often those who are most weak and defenseless. Think about your reaction to news of a woman committing some kind of cruelty to another human being, compared to hearing of a man doing the same thing. Women who have an awareness of this mission from God become a spiritual strength to those around them and teach others about their own responsibility toward the human family, thus bringing about the kingdom of God more fully.]

²⁸MD, 30.

6. St. Edith Stein, a convert, nun, and theologian who was killed at Auschwitz, says, “Woman naturally seeks to embrace that which is living, personal, and whole.”²⁹ Stein goes on to describe this inclination as a yearning to “cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth....”³⁰ Does this feminine response resonate with you, either in your own experiences or from your observations? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss.

7. Regardless of a woman’s state in life and whether she has had children, God has endowed each woman with a spiritual maternity: a natural receptivity and sensitivity to the human person in all its unique dimensions and potential. Share with the group an example of someone you know who lives out spiritual motherhood.

Allow the group to discuss.

8. How can you better live out this spiritual maternity in your daily life?

Allow the group to discuss.

9. Edith Stein reminds us that each woman manifests the feminine genius in her own beautifully unique manner when she says, “No woman is only *woman*; like man, each has her individual specialty and talent.” How can you live out your unique feminine

²⁹Edith Stein, *The Collected Words of Edith Stein, Volume Two: Essays on Woman* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1987), 43 (emphasis in the original).

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., 47.

genius in your work, classes, or social life?

Some examples: Take the time to really get to know your classmates and coworkers. Stand up against gossip. Surprise someone with a note or gift when they are having a bad day. Appreciate people for a job well done. Offer to help someone who is struggling/burdened with work.

10. Men and women are called to serve one another out of reverence for Christ, though often the service of women is practical and concrete, in direct relation to the needs of persons.

What is your reaction to this idea?

Allow the group to discuss. Because of our fallen nature, our world often sees service as degrading. However, in a Christian worldview, service has great dignity. Jesus himself tells us that he came “not to be served but to serve” (Mt 20:28). John Paul II even says that Mary’s role as Queen of the Universe is based on service: “For her, ‘to reign’ is to serve! Her service is ‘to reign!’”³²

Consider sharing Pope Francis’ quotation from “The Visitation” section.

Read Luke 1:39–56

11. How do you see Mary’s “capacity for the other” in the Visitation?

See “The Visitation” in “What do I need to know about this passage?”

³²Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, 10.

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